

The Romance of Duxbury Bay

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY

It is springtime and all nature and humankind is bursting out. It is a time to recall those immortal lines from Browning's "Pippa Passes":

The year's at the Spring

The Day's at the morn

Morning's at seven the hillside's dew-pearled

The lark's on the wing; the snail's on the thorn

God's in His Heaven; all's right with the world.

Or the familiar lines from the Song of Songs:

The winter is past and the rain is over and gone

The flowers appear on the earth: the time of the

Singing of birds has come and the voice of the

Turtle is heard in our land.

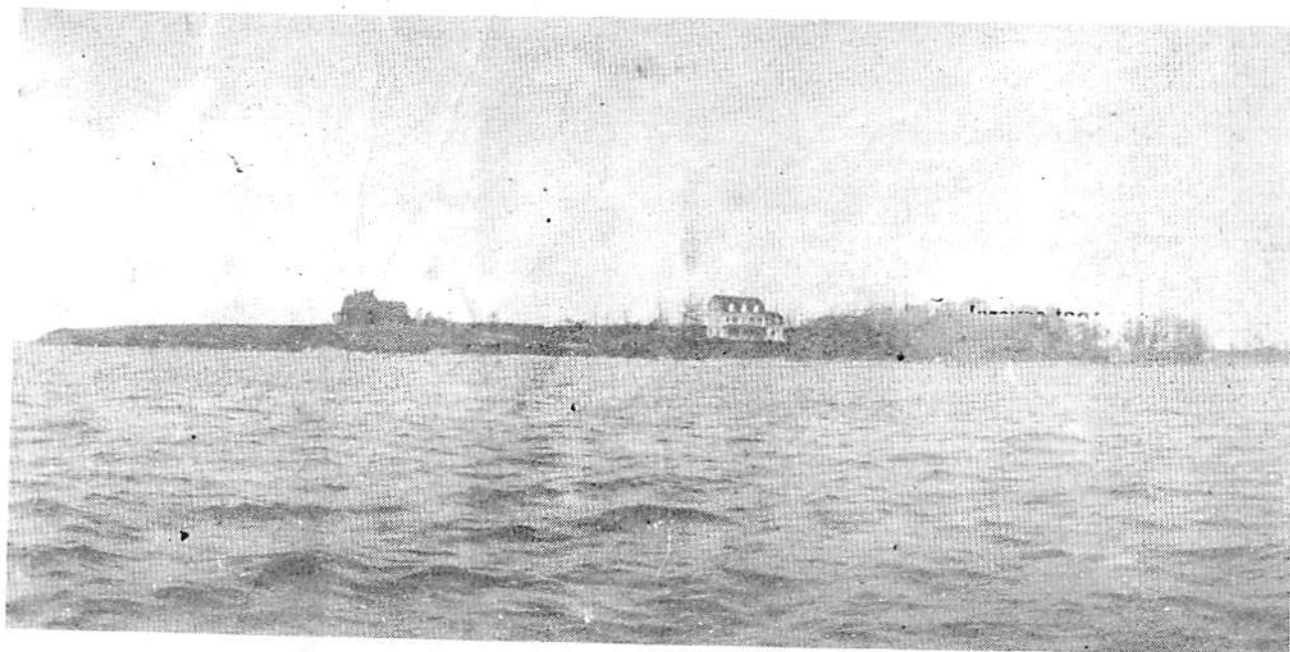
Or again in common folklore "in the springtime the young man's fancy turns to thoughts of love."

In some life-styles it is gardening time, and we turn to with a will with visions of piles of vegetables to grace our festive board all summer and after, but for those who can get to the Bay, and outside, it is the sound of the electric sander, the hammer and the bottom scraper to be followed by the softer sound of the paint brush or spray gun as "fitting out time" is upon us. Already boatyards are crowded with eager beaver sailors, getting ready for launching and the great days of sailing that will follow. It is a time of dreams, of cruise planning, of anticipation and expectancy as husbands and wives and families scan charts and maps and make projections of sea journeys.

Above all it is a time of romance, not between men and women at this state; wise wives have learned that this romance is of a different sort -- it is a man and his boat. Yes, women are welcome assistants in the galley, on the main sheet and tiller on occasion, or best of all or perhaps I should say most essential of all on shore patrol. After all who is going to act as welcoming committee when we pull into Provincetown harbor? And no woman is so stupid to take a firm stand between her husband and her chief competition, his boat. After all, she says to herself, it could be worse -- indeed my dear, much worse.

The boatyard is the annual reinstatement of the romance, suspended naturally during the winter months, and then the locus shifts to the Bay. Duxbury with its many inviting beaches and coves and harbors, as we include Marshfield and Kingston and Plymouth in the same larger body of water, is just about as perfect a place as you can find for safe water life.

Sailing or motoring to Saquish, or Plymouth Beach or the the Big Beach on a warm sunny day at high tide is



watch her as the tide came in, meanwhile getting in a good swim. On one hair-raising occasion the wind freshened and only the quick swimming ability of my son Mike captured the craft before it took off for Provincetown! Getting back to the Bay was no problem even though beating up the Gurnet channel with the Bug was a chore, because the current was with us. Knowing the channels and the location of tidal currents in the Bay is essential to safe and enjoyable sailing or motoring.

This is why this article began: A protest against the threatened cut-off of funds for the Coast Guard requiring elimination of 8 of the 19 buoys in the Bay, and navigability possibilities without them.

I was one of the writers of the "hundreds of letters from Duxbury alone" that Congressman Gerry Studds reported receiving on this matter recently in response to the alarm sounded by our harbormaster, Don Beers. Don has been our harbormaster the past 3 years, succeeding Manny Oliver, and a tremendous help he is to all who use the Bay. In winter he spends most of his spare time checking on the shellfishermen but in the summer he's usually on the Bay assisting some rooky sailor dragging back after a capsized in the Bay or on the pier at Town Landing. I'm especially sensitive to Don's position since I grounded on the edge of the channel a few hundred yards from the pier on an ebbing tide last fall. Had it not been for the vigilance of a resident on Shipyard Lane and Don's first response

for this and next season and according to Gerry Studds: a reexamination and reevaluation of the Coast Guard and its work is getting under way for future guidelines. But it may be helpful if I jot down a few things to remember about the Bay's waterways for your boating enterprises.

Of first importance is the main channel, which begins at the Bug, parallels Clark's Island until Gurnet disappears behind it, then it veers to port at a 45 degree angle all the way down to Standish Shore's ending at Eagle's Nest inlet. Then it narrows to a dredged channel all the way to the town pier. A second channel in the Bay is the Beach channel that begins roughly at the northern end of Clark's Island and heads almost due north to a point 200 yards this side of the end of Long Bridge when it makes a sharp turn to the left and goes under the bridge and becomes Back River.

The section of main channel that parallels Clark's Island is marked on the charts by the strange title of "Cowyard" because in the halcyon days of shipping schooners and squareriggers waiting for berths at Duxbury's piers or even for a favorable tide would anchor here and from shore they looked like cows outside a dairy barn waiting to go in for the night.

Beginning at the Bug there is another channel into Howland's Landing and into the Jones River estuary both in Kingston Bay. There is also a channel into the former Cordage but recent checking reveals that much

of all except those who came thus by boat but with the arrival of ORV's no place is free of people. We just have to take our chances. I remember so well when I was steward of the Yacht Club the frequent sailing picnics families took to these and other places. On a hot summer day around high tide you'd see several Duxbury Ducks pull up on the shore with picnickers beyond and swimmers nearby. It was a favorite "summer date" with your best girl, to sail in a "Bug" to the inside beach, swim, and picnic, then lunch, always keeping an eye on the tide. Another "summer date" was to sail over toward the "Bug Light," and hang in the channel as the Boston steamers emerged from Plymouth on its return daily seasonal run until it blew its resounding whistle to clear the way. Romance was often in the air, and many permanent unions found their expression here. One frequent romantic strategy was to ask your best girl out for a moonlight sail -- how romantic that was -- noting carefully the direction of the tide. And this required what we shall call a "negative knowledge" of the channels and mudflats -- because the scheme was to fetch up on a shoal and have to remain there till the tide came back. There was no "walking home" from this one.

Many stories of this kind came to me as boys bragged about their exploits while I was at the Yacht Club. Perhaps the best one was the time they came to me, with Randy Kelly as their chairman (he was a real hellraiser but a great fellow) just before the annual summer ball for young people. He said, "we used to play tricks on last year's steward because he tried to push us around, but we like you and we don't want to pull anything on you, and we're going to let you in on a scheme if you'll go along."

The scheme was that every boy would plan to be dancing with his special girl at exactly 11:30 when by some fluke (carefully arranged by an alarm clock attached to the main light switch) all the lights would go out and they'd steal a kiss or 2 in the dark. "You, meanwhile will emerge from your office with a flashlight in great indignation so no one will suspect you -- the girls will all be screaming with delight (?) and we promise you there will be no drinking nor fooling around on the grounds if you'll let us do this one thing." So that is what we did, and it all worked out fine -- no scandal, no gossip and no frantic calls to my office. All was done under the slogan, "Well, you know, boys will be boys."

One of the most delightful sailing picnics we used to enjoy was on the few days in summer when sailing picnics looked hopeless because the tide was out all through the middle of the day. The plan was this -- as the tide was running out, and preferably with an offshore wind, we'd hoist sail and pass Bug to port, and make for a deserted beach location perhaps near High Pines, reaching there hopefully at dead low tide. We would anchor the boat high on the beach and simply

have hung there all night. And this when the channel is clearly marked even at night by buoys. I don't suppose I was a second, or maybe 3, looking at the shore when the fast moving current seduced our boat on to the bank.

That word is the correct one as we turn to our third area of romance in Duxbury Bay. First was the love affair with the boat, and second the romantic associations with sailing in the Bay, and now we come to a far more fundamental romance, that of the sea itself as exemplified by this little tributary. I remember a song I'd learned in school called "The Lorelei." It is one of the sweetest songs in our musical literature. It refers to a navigational hazard in the Rhine River between France and Germany. I stood on the riverbank myself 2 years ago and watched the long lanky Rhine riverboats steer around it, and could well understand the warning the song embodies. The river takes a sharp turn to port going down toward Rotterdam and divides in 2 at just this point with this enormous rock in the center. The word "Lorelei" comes from 2 German words, one meaning "watch out" and the other "rock." And there is a legend that a maiden, unrequited in love, in despair threw herself into the river at this point and turned to stone (after all didn't Lot's wife turn into a pillar of salt?). Henceforth she sought to seduce mariners and wreck their boats here, as many female sea sirens have been known to do.

The sea has always had a romantic aspect:

"I must go down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide is a call that may not be denied" as Masfield says. And the Ancient Mariner warns us. There is a definite personal encounter as people start out to move onto the sea, and Duxbury Bay is no exception. That grounding last October was simply astonishing. It was as if a sea mermaid had pulled us onto the shoal's edge. It felt that way. That is why the greatest romance of all is the mutual recognition of sovereignty between the boat, its skipper and the Bay.

Duxbury Bay is friendly, it is soft and warm and even cuddly if I may push the metaphor a bit, but it has its personal identity and woe to the skipper who fails to respect this! Casco Bay off Falmouth and Portland, Maine, is not soft and cuddly; it is cold and hard and even rocky. A Duxbury grounding may hold you back for a few hours, or if you the the mussels scratch your bottom, but unless you are careless around the No. Plymouth Shore or the Bug or the southern end of Clark's Island no rocks will stave your boat in. Still, and all, she is a fair maiden and demands tenderness and understanding or she will hurt you. Boating on Duxbury Bay is personal, and mutually respectful; as with other persons there is activity on both sides, and you ignore this fact to your peril.

The Coast Guard has replied to our protests by continuing the channel markers as of recent years, both

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As there are channels in the Bay, so there are also high spots which are to be respected at all times except full tide. What is more, some of them have "grown" since I left the Yacht Club. I ran Frank Hoyt's neat cruiser aground twice going out to the Clark's Island picnic 2 summers ago -- relying entirely on my own experience in the Bay of 50 years ago. High points are Captain's Flat, these 2 summits I ran into off the northern end of Clark's Island, several of the flats in the middle of the Bay and a new sand bar has been added close to the entrance of Kingston channel. My brother Stan has motored with him at low tide in pitch darkness from Clark's Island to the Cove, while determining his course by the echo of his shouts from the shore.

Ed Brock, my neighborhood lobsterman navigates the bay without channel markers, sighting from flagpoles on Standish Shore and the Cordage chimney. He says the most dangerous place of all in the Bay is the Bug light area with its double rock pile and vicious tidal currents. Many boats are led astray with the one rock pile near the light, not reasoning that there is probably another pile nearby, both of which of course are for the breaking up of the ice before it piles up in front of the Bug and threatens its stability.

Ed Brock and Don Beers both emphasize that the contour of the Bay is always shifting. When I wrote a story about the building of Long Bridge I had a phone call from Dr. George Starr who informed me that the bridge was 72 feet shorter than the 2,000 feet I indicated; the beach has moved that far inland since the bridge was built. So nothing is to be taken for granted. This year a 3,000-pound channel marker was wafted out to sea in one of our raging blizzards.

The sea is a temptress; she demands recognition and deference to her whims whether in the ocean or in the Bay, in a quiet little hamlet like Duxbury:

*Where health and plenty cheer and laboring swain
Where smiling spring its earliest visit pays and parting*

*Summer's lingering blooms delayed
Dear lovely bowers of innocence and ease--
She still remains wily and whimsical.*

And perhaps viewing the situation from a materialistic age, we can understand some of the values even a pagan world outlook fostered -- patience and caution and above all courtesy:

*So might I on this pleasant lea
(said Wordsworth sensing the coming secularism)
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn
To see Old Proteus rising from the sea or
Hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.*

In an age that boasts of its openness, can we become once again receptive to sentiments like these without the superstition so often attributed to them?